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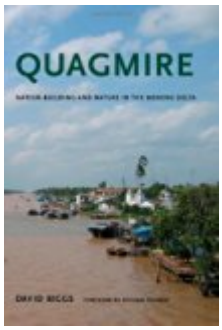

David Biggs. *Quagmire: Nation-Building and Nature in the Mekong Delta.* Weyerhaeuser Environmental Books Series. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010. Illustrations. xviii + 300 pp. $35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-295-99067-5.

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In *Quagmire*, David Biggs describes an apparently endless process of dredging, filling, diking, draining, and cultivating in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. Biggs argues that these processes both produce and are produced by acts of nation building, imperialism, war making, and market expansion. While these are potentially heady subjects, Biggs never strays far from the ground, or at least observations of the ground, in the form of aerial photos, maps, surveys, and land use documents. And while Biggs discusses presidential cabinet meetings and war room strategy, his environmental history always returns to the individuals who live and work in the Delta, reminding us that "survival in such a place demands movement, negotiation, and experience" (p. 13). It is precisely this keen awareness of movement, sometimes shockingly powerful--the flooding of a monsoon or the carpet bombing of an American B-52--and sometimes subtle--the gradual buildup of *dos d'ane* (river sediment that forms sand bars) or the impact of hundreds of thousands of small outboard motors on the flow of water in the Delta--that Biggs brings to both his concrete descriptions of land use and his metaphors for nation building. There is far too much beautiful detail in *Quagmire* to do the book justice in such a short review, so I will focus on what I take to be the central concern of Biggs's research: the role of the Delta environment in making (or unmaking) a concrete and legible state.

At the heart of this research agenda is an understanding that the state is something more than a collection of people or a series of institutions. To exist, a state needs subjects and institutions and laws, but it also needs symbols and territory and, most important, facts on the ground. Biggs never wades too deeply into a theoretical discussion of state making or nation building. He briefly cites Michel Foucault's governmentality and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's schizophrenic spaces. Instead, Biggs uses the sedimented artifacts of state making, the instruments of measurement and the earth-moving machines, the technologies that make space legible and thus governable, to tell a story about the repeated attempts to "con-

cretize," "harmonize," and "stabilize" the Delta and its people. ***Quagmire*** is a story about the tension between a series of attempts to find the Delta's "final form" and the incessant eco-logic of the Delta itself, a logic that bends even steel and concrete toward movement and flow. The result, so similar to other famous flood control projects (the levees and spillways of southern Louisiana come to mind), is a "work of Penelope," a never-ending hydraulic engineering project. And it is this project that necessitates and justifies what Biggs describes as a hydraulic bureaucracy.

In the opening chapter, ***Quagmire*** "orient[s] the reader to the delta's basic geography and the two ways of navigating it--from above and from the surface" (p. 22). As the book progresses more or less chronologically through successive political regimes, Biggs alternates between these two modes of navigation, weaving together the often contradictory God's eye view with the view from sea (or canal) level. This narrative approach allows him to juxtapose a multiauthored landscape apparently "born of the masses" (p. 109), in the words of archaeologist J. Y. Claeys, with the unevenness of power produced and sustained by certain technologies of government (e.g., aerial photography, land parcel surveys, gunboats, helicopters). The shift between a "horizontal view" and a "vertical view" allows Biggs to confront the ruptures and slippages of a rigid techno-managerial discourse in a fluid and hybrid landscape. While some actors (including the author) move between the two views with relative (though unequal) ease, the discourses that produce and are produced by the landscape are often more rooted in their artifacts and modes of production. Biggs is always interested in the uneasy hybridity of the material and discursive, the human and nonhuman, and the concrete and fluid. Blending disciplinary perspectives from history, anthropology, and geography, Biggs approaches the Mekong Delta as a landscape--as things on the land, as people, institutions, discourses, artifacts, metaphors, and eco-logics--with a particularly unstable morphology. The landscape-as-quagmire refers to "both the physical space and the political complexities associated with it," and as such, it has something to tell us about the successive regimes of governance, the lived experience of peasants and laborers, and the land (and water) within and upon which such relative permanences are constructed (p. 8).

From the royal power of the precolonial Vietnam state to the French ***mission civilisatrice*** to postcolonial Vietnam to the American military and finally to the international economic colonization of the "virgin" Delta region, each governing regime worked to manage the hydrology of the Delta through channelization, road and bridge construction, dike and dam building, and land distribution schemes. As Biggs pointedly notes, "the failure of colonial engineers and administrators to achieve the steady hydraulic state thus implied a possible failure to control the flow of politics as well" (p. 90). Not only did the dynamic hydrology of the Delta impede state governance by slowing transportation and playing havoc with scientific measurements and mapping exercises, but it also made land reclamation and distribution and agricultural modernization difficult. Such challenges weigh heavily on a centralized state apparatus attempting to overcome the ethnic balkanization of an already environmentally balkanized "frontier" landscape.

Without permanent "improvements" to the land, especially physically unstable land, the hegemony of the center over the periphery is hard to maintain, the civilizing mission hard to justify. Biggs notes that "early surveys and expeditions ... demonstrate what [Benedict] Anderson explains as the necessary business of creating property histories that locate the colony geographically and historically, but such acts of nonerasure also advanced and preserved existing framings" (p. 82). Biggs articulates how successive governing regimes used the same surveys, maps, and aerial photos to make the Delta legible. As

Foucault has suggested, it is through the language of statistics that the modern state expresses itself and secures the consent of the governed. Yet these sedimented "acts of nonerasure" allow for multiple framings of space and land, and Biggs describes how the failures of measurement and engineering "revealed the shortcomings and vulnerabilities of an expanding, modern state" (p. 82). The attempt and failure to control nature effectively delegitimizes the central state.

We can draw fascinating parallels between the Mekong Delta and the Mississippi Delta, which Biggs does on several occasions, not only because the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has played such an important role in the engineering of space in both places, but also because we can see firsthand how the control of nature becomes inexorably linked to the legitimacy of the state. The administration of George W. Bush was never so criticized as after their failure to respond aggressively to Hurricane Katrina; there is no organization more maligned in southern Louisiana than the Army Corps of Engineers. And yet, in a region often so opposed to federal government intervention, the anger over the failure of the federal government to control the movement of water in the Delta is a curious ideological anomaly. Once they have begun, the works of Penelope have a strange mandate to perpetuate themselves, demanding ever-greater layers of hydraulic bureaucracy.

Biggs's use of the word "quagmire" is telling. To become bogged down, mired, inextricable, is to be firmly embedded in struggles over land, and not just land as territory, but also land as home and livelihood. It would perhaps be a form of environmental determinism to suggest that delta landscapes resist schemes of governance, but what Biggs suggests is that the sedimented and schizophrenic spaces of land tenure, resource extraction, nation building, and home building combine with the shifting eco-logic of the Delta to create an uncertain terrain. However often it is mapped and measured it continually surprises and frustrates those who would seek a final form, for whatever purpose.

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